History, Tradition, Myth and Territory in a Nahua Village (Guerrero, Mexico)

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To my dear and courageous friend, Modesto Vázquez Salgado (†)
We all miss you very much.

Abstract: In this chapter I will try to show, by considering one contemporary case in the State of Guerrero, the Nahua community of Atliaca, how indigenous *pueblos* maintain the tradition of using local history to negotiate the protection of their land and native culture with the Mexican state. This process is especially evident in the case of Atliaca and the recovery that it made of its land and historical documents after a long struggle. In this case the history that is recovered, or resurrected, is one in which the *pueblo* maintains communal lands. The town of Atliaca, is home to a multitude of intersecting traditions and rituals as well as tales about local caves and spell. The *pueblo's* inhabitants thus move in two worlds, combining – sometimes successfully – aspects of their traditional culture with new cultural elements introduced from without. Furthermore, they effect this combination dynamically, but without amalgamating the traditional and non-traditional. Rather, they move back and forth between the two depending upon the circumstances at hand.

Keywords: local history; tradition; territory, Nahua; Guerrero; Mexico; 20th-21st century.

Resumen: En este capítulo voy a mostrar cómo los pueblos indígenas mantienen la tradición de usar la historia local para negociar la protección de su tierra y su cultura nativa con el Estado mexicano. Considero un caso contemporáneo en el Estado de Guerrero, la comunidad nahua de Atliaca. La recuperación que hizo de sus tierras y de los documentos históricos después de una larga lucha es muy evidente. En este caso, la historia que se recupera o resucita, es aquella en la que el pueblo mantiene tierras comunales. La ciudad de Atliaca es el hogar de una multitud de tradiciones y rituales interconectados, así como de relatos sobre las cuevas y hechizos locales. Los habitantes del pueblo se mueven en dos mundos, combinando –a veces con éxito– aspectos de su cultura tradicional con nuevos elementos culturales introducidos desde afuera. Además, efectúan esta combinación dinámicamente, pero sin amalgamar lo tradicional con lo no tradicional. Más bien, se mueven de un lado a otro dependiendo de las circunstancias a la mano.

Palabras clave: historia local; tradición; territorio; nahua; Guerrero; México; siglo xx-xxi.

1 I thank Daniel Graña-Behrens for his kind invitation to submit this work. I also thank Adolfo de Paz for his wonderful invitation in 2003 to be part of his Anthropology School Project. Last but not least, I thank young English translator Alister Mcreadie for his invaluable aid in translating and correcting my Spanish text to English.

Introduction

The formulations of the past that indigenous groups elaborate serve as a resource for undertaking social action in the present (Hill 1988: 9). In this way, when an indigenous *pueblo* conveys information in their historical accounts that does not correspond to rigid historical 'truth', it is demonstrating how historical knowledge is used to create a moral continuity between the past and the present (Hill 1988: 66, 76; Ruiz Medrano 2014). For example, in observing the Nasa from Colombia, Rappaport offers an insight that could be applied to indigenous people from Mexico, or even to indigenous peoples across Latin America more broadly: "[...] to be a good Nasa historian, one must have more than a grasp of the past: one must also be capable of articulating past and present in order to change the future" (Rappaport 1990: 195).

Consequently, all of the information about their past, about the image they held of their own history, that Mexico's indigenous peoples set down in their written, oral and painted tradition: *Techialoyan* codices, primordial titles, painted maps, and other pictographic and written documents, constitutes a process of negotiation. It is not something fixed and frozen in texts, but something fluid, that must be studied in its social, political, and historical specificity (Ruiz Medrano 2011, 2013). In the act of recovering their history, the indigenous *pueblos* have certain members who play a predominant role. Their leaders, for example, serve as the principal repository of the *pueblo's* collective memory, its history, and folklore. The memories or stories which they transmit are shaped by present-day concerns (Abercrombie 1998: xxiv, 85, 200-201).

To succeed in preserving their past and transmitting it into the present, indigenous communities have had to resist the colonial and national states alike, both of which consciously attempted (and, in the case of some national states, may still attempt) to redesign and mold the indigenous past as part of their strategies of colonization and domination. (Abercrombie 1998: 16) Clearly, "colonialism produces not only a contention of societies and cultures but also a conflict of history" (Abercrombie 1998: 18), although books and the culture of written law have been and continue to be highly valued by the indigenous, oral tradition has been and continues to be deeply respected by them as well (Abercrombie 1998: 117). The oral tradition enables the indigenous communities to recount their past in a dynamic and fluid way; it entails a continuous process of creative and collective transformation.

The art of memory requires not only remembering but also what has been called "structured forgetting" (Salomon 1982). Thus, both Salomon and Abercrombie have argued that the contradiction, in seeking to reduce oral narrative to writing, lies in the reality of two irreconcilable notions of time and history. The Spaniards' perception of historical time as linear and unitary, and as a sequence lacking any repetition of events, makes it impossible for them to absorb and comprehend the distinctly different

perception of historical time found in the Andes, where the validity of a sequence of episodes in a narrative does not require that it fit neatly into a single master narrative (Abercrombie 1998: 195).

This argument is equally valid for the indigenous peoples of Mexico. In Mexico as in the Andes, the historical land titles, for example, are held onto and transmitted among indigenous authorities and families from generation to generation, because they serve to protect the land which, in turn, harbors the memory of the *pueblo* founded by their ancestors and, as such, must be safeguarded for future generations. Each boundary marker of the indigenous lands likewise helps protect them and helps preserve historical memory. In keeping with this tradition, marking off the boundaries of a *pueblo's* lands has been and remains today a ritualized act in which the *pueblo* as a whole was and is fully engaged. When indigenous *pueblos* take up arms to defend their lands it is not a sign of their descent into irrational violence but of their determination to protect a history and identity which must be passed on to future generations (Abercrombie 1998: 287-288, 290; Ruiz Medrano 2011; Ruiz Medrano, Barrera Gutiérrez & Barrera Gutiérrez 2012).

Atliaca: A Nahua village in the mountains of Guerrero

Atliaca (Figure 1) is the largest Nahua village in the mountainous region of the state of Guerrero referred to as *La Montaña* ('The Mountain'). I stayed there for several short seasons of fieldwork during a period of a little over two years, between 2003 and 2005. According to the 2005 census, Atliaca at the time had a population of 7,439 inhabitants.[2] Almost 70 % of them spoke Spanish as a second language; the area is mainly Nahuatl speaking, and belongs to the mestizo[3] municipality of Tixtla. The village is small, with traditional architecture. They have a school, electricity, and a shelter for indigenous children from the surroundings, although it is more often used for children from Atliaca itself.[4] The community has had serious problems with drainage and drinking water, in 2002 four children died from drinking water from the faucet that was contaminated with fecal matter (Habana 2002).

2 Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística, Censo 2005. I believe that Atliaca's inhabitants could number almost 9,000 people. It's important to notice that Mexican Government National Census have many errors, especially because they center on political programs and not on an exhaustive data recollection.

3 In Colonial times this term generally referred to people of mixed race. But since probably the 19th century and until recent decades, it mostly defines indigenous people that can't or won't speak their indigenous native language.

4 The field information contained in this article was mostly provided to me by Maestro Modesto Vázquez Salgado (†), to whom I am deeply grateful for the time he spent talking with me throughout 2003, 2004 and part of 2005.

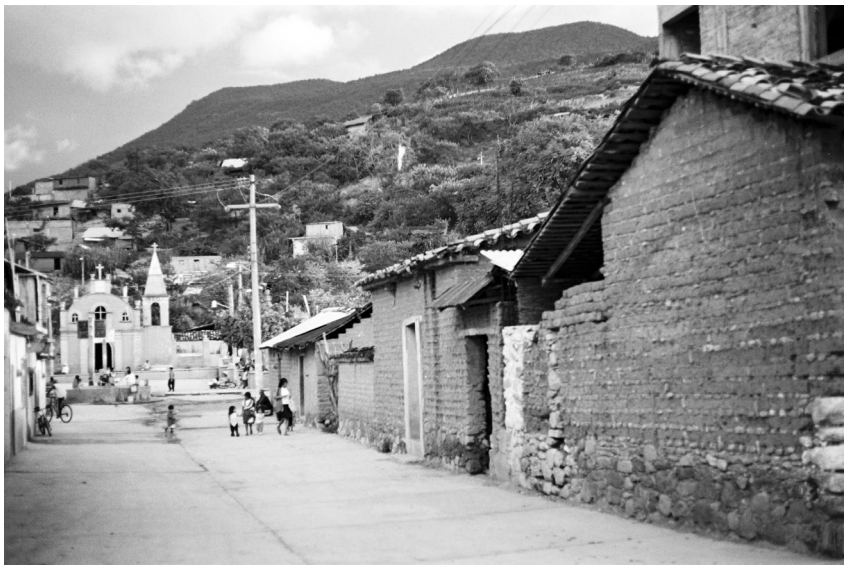

Figure 1. Atliaca, State of Guerrero, Mexico (photo: courtesy of Adolfo de Paz).

Most of the local people work in the fields. They have common land that is used in particular for growing maize. However, a number of them work in the brickworks, also located on communal land, where they make bricks from black clay. This industry began in around 1979, when the National Indigenous Institute (INI) sent consultants to Atliaca to teach residents the trade. The brickworks employ local people, and the bricks are sold for a good price in several different locations, including Chilpancingo, the capital of the state of Guerrero. Although clay reserves are fast running out, manufacturing bricks currently provides a decent income for the village, which means that the people of Atliaca no longer have to emigrate to other places like Zumpango, where they used to go to pick tomatoes, Huitzuco or Iguala, where they would travel for the fall harvest, or Tepecua and Tazmala, where people also used to go to find work (all located in present day State of Guerrero).

Atliaca has a large *cabildo* or local government house that accommodates the local authorities, who govern according to indigenous laws and are elected on a yearly basis. The village is steeped in tradition. For example, it is famous locally because it has a deep cave located on its land called Oztotempan, where every May 3rd a ritual for rain petition is held, as in many towns all over Mexico (*Día de la Santa Cruz*, Holly Cross Day). In the case of Atliaca's ritual, people come from more than thirty nearby communities to take part in an extraordinary ceremony that lasts all night long. On this occasion, the

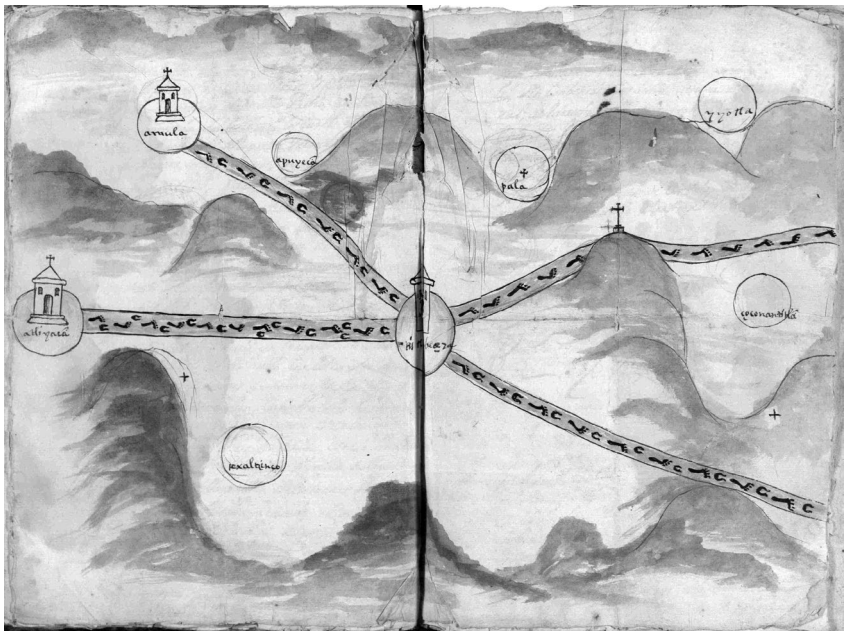

Figure 2. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico, (AGN), Map No. 1884. Date: 1619 (Ruiz Medrano 2011: 220, fig. 4.3; © Archivo General de la Nación).

local people throw enormous offerings into the depths of the cave, while also praying and sacrificing animals (Sepúlveda 1973).[5]

As the inhabitants of Atliaca explained to me, giants live at the bottom of the cavern and that is why the offerings they throw in must be so large. Around the wide rim of the cave, twelve crosses have been raised, each by a different local village. The crosses are part of a long-standing tradition, as is worship at the Oztotempan cave itself, which is probably pre-Hispanic in origin. The village of Atliaca is known to have been founded in pre-Hispanic times. During the colonial period, it was represented as a rural settlement belonging to Tixtla on a map from the beginning of the 17th century (Figure 2) (Ruiz Medrano 2011: 220).

I was told of an unusual incident that took place a few years ago. A group of evangelist Nahua from the same village of Atliaca set out one night and tore up all the crosses around the Oztotempan cave in protest at what they considered 'idolatry'. This act – sacrilegious in the eyes of the rest of the local indigenous population – almost cost the protesters their lives; The people of Atliaca attempted to lynch them, and they were forced to flee the village for a time.

5 Unfortunately, this extraordinary petition ceremony has been poorly documented.

At the start of my fieldwork in Atliaca, in November of 2003, I undertook an activity with the Nahua children at the village shelter. For an afternoon, I had them draw on large sheets of paper with colored pencils and crayons. My idea was to have the drawings framed and hang them on the walls of the shelter's auditorium. At the end of the afternoon, the children showed me their indigenous manuscript paintings, and among them were two depictions of Oztotempan drawn by two little Nahua girls aged between eight and ten years, Karla and Miriam (Figures 3 and 4).

As can be seen in the figures, both drawings show the crosses around the mouth of the cave, and one of them has an enthusiastically written caption explaining the tradition of the Oztotempan *fiesta*. Clearly recognizable in the drawings is a style typical of the Mesoamerican pictography tradition, with a depiction of the *tepetl* or 'mountain' and the representation of *atl* or 'water'. A comparison of the drawings with an indigenous pictographic map from the end of the 16th century, from a village relatively close to Atliaca called Tlalcosautitlán (Figure 5) is sufficient for these similarities to be noted. The style of the drawings, especially the element of water, can be observed to be very alike. However, the most interesting part of all this was that shortly after I had seen the drawings, I was told that both girls, Karla and Miriam, were the daughters of some of the evangelical locals who had pulled down the crosses a few years earlier.

This case demonstrated that, under cultural conditions in which a new religion was being adopted, there was simultaneously a tacit recognition of more traditional cultural practices, which had not been eradicated by the new religious culture. In this instance there is in fact a parallel recognition of the cultural traditions implicit in the day-to-day collective imagination.

The people of Atliaca without doubt have a great deal of interest in their local history and traditions, as illustrated by the case of Karla and Miriam. In the village in April of 2003, I met Don Xavier, who earns a living by fixing wind instruments that he finds in dumps and at scrap-metal markets. With dedication and hard work, Javier restores these instruments impeccably, and he plays his tubas and trumpets with great enthusiasm once they are repaired.

Don Xavier confided in me that he had in his possession some ancient codices relating to the history of Atliaca, which he guarded jealously. When I expressed my curiosity he enigmatically produced several contemporary reproductions of Mayan codices of a very common kind, which he assured me he had inherited from his grandparents. He explained that they were very old and that they narrated the pre-Hispanic history of Atliaca (Figure 6), and he confidently informed me that he could read them because his grandparents had taught him how. Don Javier explained that the codices showed the route that the ancestors of Atliaca had travelled. He also said that there had never been

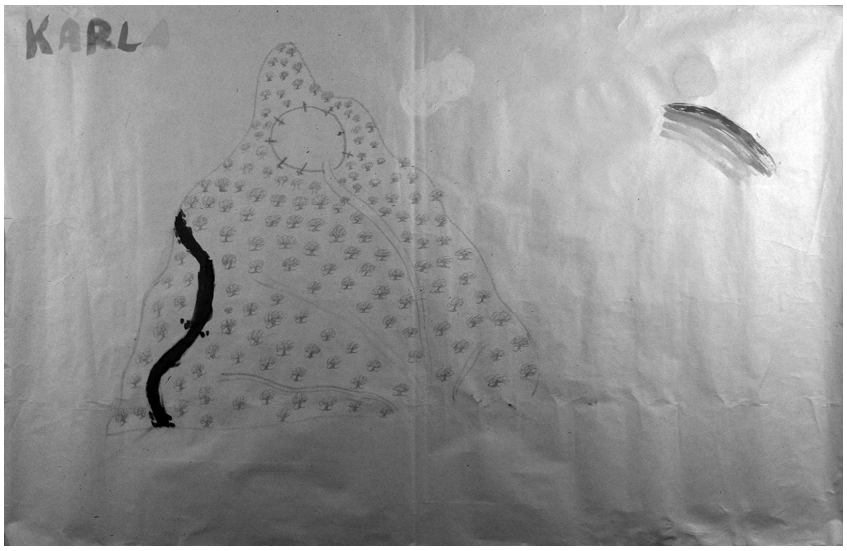

Figure 3. Drawing by Karla, Atliaca, November 2003
(photo: courtesy of Adolfo de Paz).

Figure 4. Drawing by Miriam, Atliaca, November 2003
(photo: courtesy of Adolfo de Paz).

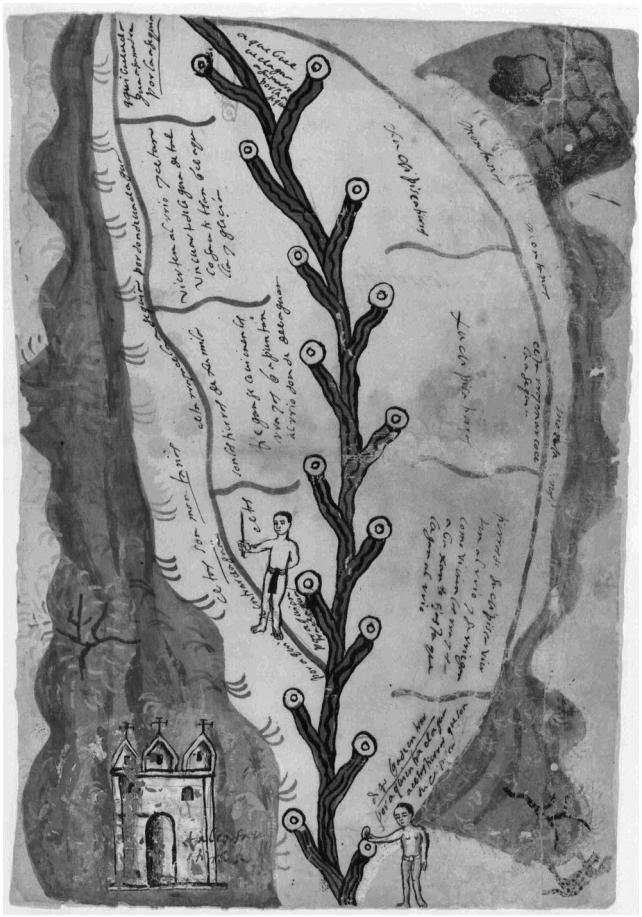

Figure 5. Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico, (AGN), Map No. 1803. Date: 1587 (Ruiz Medrano 2011: 223, fig. 4.6; © Archivo General de la Nación).

any Spanish people in his village, and that he had been taught the Spanish language by *gringos* (US American people).

In a sense, Don Xavier is right. Research carried out 15 years ago shows that Atliaca, among other villages in *La Montaña* in Guerrero, was founded following a migration of people from Xochimilco (in the Central Valley of Mexico), possibly dating to before the Spanish conquest and the final wave of which probably occurred in the 17th century. What is interesting is that Javier reconstructed this tradition and explained it using a contemporary reproduction of a Mayan codex.

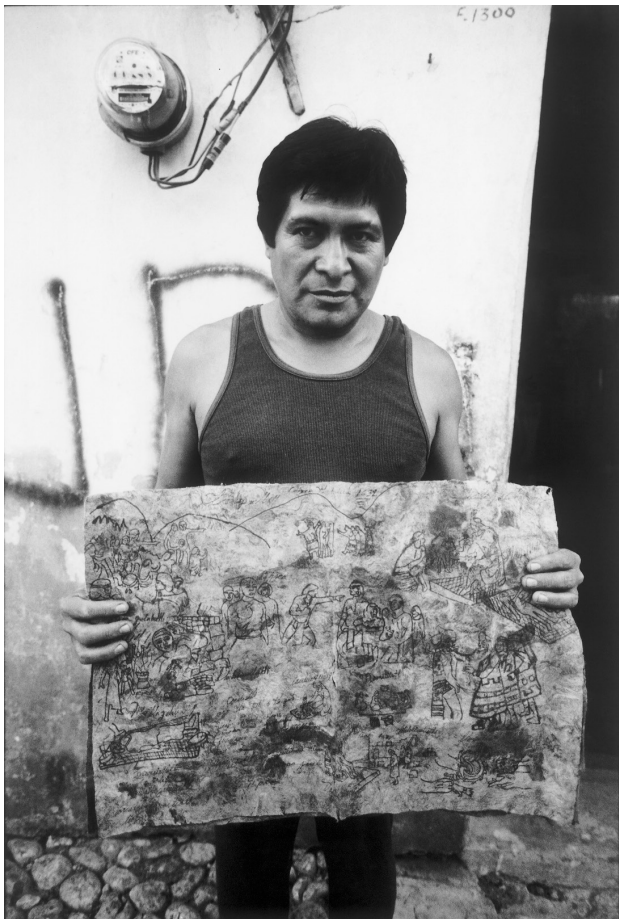

Figure 6. Don Xavier with the map, Atlica, April 2003 (photo: courtesy of Adolfo de Paz).

In relation to other cultural traditions that have survived, the people of Atliaca believe in *caballeritos*, from the Spanish word for little knights or horseman, who fly through the night sky and can sometimes be seen in the form of comets. These figures are completely benevolent and defend people from other beings who are considered wicked, and who are constantly trying to bring discord to the lives of ordinary people. Traditions of this kind are based on long time ago oral traditions, but on occasion it is possible to trace the history of some of them through historical documentation.

The people of Atliaca recall the legend of a bridge, probably from late Colonial time, on the road out of the village. Like the village church tower, the mortar that holds these structures together is said to be made of human blood. The concept, which is very widespread among Mesoamerican peoples, is rooted in the notion that the stones of pre-Hispanic temples were cemented in place with the blood of human sacrificial victims. For example, in the *Relaciones Geográficas* from the end of the 16th century (geographical accounts) of Tlaxcala it is stated that the stones of the pyramid complex at Cholula were held together with the blood of children: "They would kill children of two and three years, and using their blood mixed with lime in the manner of *zulaque*,[6] they would render the fountains that flowed [...]" (Relaciones Geográficas 1984: Tomo 1, 250). Interestingly, in the Andes its ancient population also believed that blood, provided through human sacrifice, was an indispensable element to guarantee the durability and strength of cult stone buildings. For example, Dean mentions that

> [...] on the second siq'i of Antisuyu was the quarry called Curovilca, and says that 'they sacrificed to it so that it might not give out, and so that the buildings built of stone from it might not fall' (*Sacrificábanle por que no se acabase ni se cayesen los edificios que dellas se hacían*) (Dean 2010: 206, n.118).

But let's go back to our case; on the bridge at Atliaca, a supernatural being appears to nighttime travelers, normally in the form of an attractive woman who uses her beauty to lure unsuspecting men. When they come close, she seduces them and has sexual relations with them; when the sex act reaches completion, the temptress immediately turns into a horribly deformed being, takes the man's semen, strikes him in the face with it, raises it to the night sky, and then tosses it into a fire. The terrified victim is forced to flee and, as the legend goes, any unlucky soul who has the poor judgment to allow himself to be seduced will die three days later.

When I asked the people who told me this story why the semen was raised to the sky, they responded that the being did this to venerate its 'god'. I was also told that the being was neither man nor woman, but was a kind of sorcerer that took energy from human semen. While the legend has elements that could be considered as belonging to Western evil beings, such as the *incubus*, and its origins may lie in the traditional European concept of witchcraft, including the witches' coven (Ginzburg 2004), what is notable in this case is that there is a document from the Inquisition in the 17th century that recounts the same story for the same region of Atliaca.

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6 *Zulaque*: A paste generally made with tow fibers, lime, oil, and ground slag or glass, used to seal the joints of conduits in water pipes and for other waterworks.

On February 19th, 1663, a prosecutor received a letter that had been delivered to the inquisitorial courts from Tixtla, which as previously mentioned is the capital of the municipality where Atliaca is located, and is around 15 kilometers distant. A note was made in the margin of the letter that says "this notice is vague and pertains to Indians that are not subject to the tribunal". The report stated that:

> There are some Indians that take the form of women and therein skulk among the shadows in all the states, and speaking with them [with men] [using pretexts] of love draw them to carnal excess in the belief that they are women, and in this act they take the semen in their hand and strike the man about the face with it and return to their male form, and those who [illegible] die within three or four days with no cure whatsoever, and with this diabolical invention seven or eight Spaniards, *mestizos* and *mulattos* have died, and others who did not indulge in such excess are witness to it and have remained alive.[7]

Curiously, at the end of the letter the inquisitorial authorities noted the following:

> It [this notice] is also vague like the previous one, as it does not state how this is known or whom it was heard from, and the accuser is now deceased and therefore cannot be questioned.[8]

Could the person who reported the matter have become a victim of the nighttime sorcerers that people claim are at large around the village of Atliaca?

The letter in question is clearly referring to the same narrative that is currently told in Atliaca, albeit with one or two notable modifications. The most important of these is that today, the account in Atliaca revolves around a supernatural being, while in the report of the 17th century it is claimed that there are Indigenous men who disguise themselves as women to debase Spanish, *mestizo* and *mulatto* men. As this was a matter involving indigenous people, and because the accuser, a Spaniard, had died shortly afterward, the Inquisition declined to take action.

The accusation is clear: The victims are Spaniards, *mestizos* and *mulattos*. In colonial times, Atliaca was placed under the jurisdiction of the neighboring city of Tixtla, populated mostly by *criollo* cattle ranchers of Spanish descent, many of whom had *mulatto* workers that the indigenous people undoubtedly feared. Nowadays there is a traditional dance in Tixtla referred to as Tlacololeros, in which men dance with their faces painted black, with monkey skins symbolizing wildness on their hats, and with long whips in their hands that they crack hard against the ground as they dance frenetically. This is obviously a reference to the black foremen employed by white landowners, and the terrifying

7 My parentheses, Archivo General de la Nación, México (from now on AGN), *Ramo de Inquisición*, Vol. 513, Expediente 5.

8 AGN, *Ramo de Inquisición*, Vol.513, Expediente 5.

whips they used. *Criollo* (Europeans born in Spanish America) and *mestizo* ranchers without doubt caused untold damage to the lands of nearby indigenous settlements.

The Nahua people of Atliaca in fact probably managed to survive intact because their village was a way station and place of rest for the merchants and mule trains that travelled from Mexico City to Acapulco, due to its location just off the road. This may have allowed Atliaca to persist as an independent village, albeit at odds with the *criollos* and *mestizos* who inhabited, and continue to inhabit, Tixtla. From the early 17th century some of the indigenous people from Atliaca and the surroundings probably adopted a kind of defense mechanism whereby they would terrorize the local *criollos*, mestizos and *mulattos* by dressing up as women and, possibly, committing the acts that they are accused of in the letter. Over time, this mechanism became part of the village's story-telling tradition, and the indigenous people were naturally replaced in their role by a supernatural being. Whatever the case, the oral tradition of Atliaca is remarkably similar to the accusation filed in the 17th century.

The letter in question also mentions some beliefs that are still held by the people currently living in Atliaca, including a belief in shape-shifting *nahualli*[9] (Martínez González 2011). For example, the letter states:

> [...] that the earth and animals talk, and men become animals and birds of all types that they call *nahual*, and it is said that in this form they have done much evil to many people in all states, and in all of them it is said that both men and women may take this form, even though the ministers have attempted to solve this.[10]

I have often been told in Atliaca that people are *nanahualtin*. One of the villagers that spoke to me most often about this subject was Maestro Modesto Vázquez Salgado. He was once visiting the house of a friend in the village and noticed that his host had nothing to offer him to eat; the host, however, promptly left the house and returned with a chicken. The following day, his friend's neighbor was heard complaining that an animal had entered his chicken coop and stolen a bird. Maestro Modesto laughed and told me that his friend had turned himself into an animal to get dinner.

Similarly, for the last two years it has been forbidden for the church in Atliaca to open before five o'clock in the morning. Up until recently, the church would fill up with candles and offerings that often meant that villagers were trying to 'harm' (or put a spell on) one of their neighbors. This led the village authorities to keep the church and its graveyard closed until the aforementioned hour. Due to the responsibility they

9 The term 'nahualism' refers to common practices and beliefs associated by two different concepts that convey into the term *nahualli* (pl. *nanahualtin*). Those *nahualli* can both signify, depending on the context, what specialists named *man-nahualli*, an anthropomorphic being capable by will to transform its shape; and can also often define an person animal *alter ego* sharing the same destiny by birth.

10 AGN, *Ramo de Inquisición*, Vol. 513, Expediente 5.

bear, even the village authorities sometimes fear that someone might try to do them harm. One of the most common curses is putting worms or *ocuilin* in the food. It was explained to me that this was common at fiestas; when the time comes to eat; the victim – sometimes one of the village leaders themselves – is served a dish of hot beans, but realizes that something is moving on the plate. When he notices the worms or *ocuilin*, the hapless victim looks around him and can generally identify the perpetrator, who will be another party-goer eating casually nearby. The rest of the guests then force this person, with threats and insults, to use his power to remove the maggots from the plate and the communal pot that everyone else will eat from.

In Atliaca, traditions such as those I have mentioned and many, many more exist together with local tales of caverns and spells, not to mention the giants that everyone says live at the bottom of the Oztotempan pit and who receive in offering the enormous baskets of food that are tossed in, often together with live turkeys. Alongside the myths and the stories, the people of Atliaca use cellular telephones, iPad and internet. They have local authorities whose concern it is to establish rules governing ownership of the village's sources of employment: basically the brickworks and family-run transportation businesses with trucks for haulage or passenger buses. They have also taken on local landowners in court, and have ultimately had them removed from their ancestral lands (Ruiz Medrano 2011; Ruiz Medrano, Barrera Gutiérrez & Barrera Gutiérrez 2012).

They bring together, often successfully, traditional cultural aspects with innovative ones. This is done dynamically, but rather than mixing the elements in question together, they alternate back and forth from one to the other as required by the circumstances. Four years ago, shortly before the election for the governor of Guerrero, I was taking an evening stroll through the village with my friend Maestro Modesto. I noticed that outside the village hall, whose windows had been thrown open, several men were sharing out hoes, spades and sacks of cement. Modesto chuckled next to me, and I asked him what he was laughing at. He explained that the people from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)[11] in Chilpancingo were gearing up for the election and had brought the tools and cement to the village hall "[...] so that we vote for the PRI". I asked him what he thought people in the village would do, and he replied that the people from the PRI thought that they could buy votes with these gifts because they were convinced that the villagers were "ignorant peasants, but we'll see". A week later, I found out that in

11 The political party that ruled Mexico for more than 70 years is now (2014) on power again. For almost the last 30 years the PRI has been a conservative party that pursues neoliberal policies amidst incredible corruption and violence.

Atliaca, 98 % of the population had voted for the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD),[12] but that they had kept the hoes, spades and sacks of cement that the PRI had given them to buy their votes anyway.

This situation is illustrative of the way in which the Nahua inhabitants of Atliaca combine their traditions and beliefs with the changing landscape of the outside world. The decision to break with a long history of political patronage that favored the PRI and to support a different political party is part of a newly achieved autonomy in electoral preferences, which are no longer tied to the small gifts that used to buy votes. This has been considerably influenced by a recent change of mentality among the villagers of Atliaca, caused by a long struggle against a local landowner who tried to take possession of their best lands.

Atliaca and his historical territory

The importance of land for indigenous communities, and its links to ancient documents, property deeds and local history, informs the complex negotiations that indigenous people undertake with the State in defense of their property. These negotiations require them to have an understanding of official legality, as well as to interpret from their own cultural viewpoint the messages, programs, documents and agrarian laws that have been, and continue to be, produced by the state (Ruiz Medrano 2011, 2013) and in which indigenous peoples have assigned the importance of a modern mythology to official seals, notarizations and property deeds themselves (Nuijten 2004: 209; Ruiz Medrano 2011, 2012, 2013; Ruiz Medrano, Barrera Gutiérrez & Barrera Gutiérrez 2012).

The ability of indigenous people to uphold cultural elements of their own in the most adverse legal circumstances, sometimes with great success, depends on their enormous skill for negotiation and a remarkable ideological flexibility (Ducey 1999: 127; Ruiz Medrano 2011, 2012, 2013; Ruiz Medrano, Barrera Gutiérrez & Barrera Gutiérrez 2012).

The people of Atliaca currently have official recognition for 13,592 hectares of common land. However, beginning in 1975 and up until a short time ago, a local mestizo cattle rancher and manufacturer and seller of mescal (an alcohol beverage produce out

12 The PRD party rose at the beginning a left flag, but it's the same as the PRI. In Guerrero from 1988 to 1994 dozens of peasant where killed by the government, most of them where leaders that militate in the PRD. At present day the PRD – along with the PRI – are held responsible for the assassinations of many indigenous leaders and authorities from towns all over Guerrero, and especially for the world known disappearance and killing of the 43 indigenous students from the School of Ayotzinapa. The school, created more than eighty years ago to form rural elementary teachers, is only steps away of Atliaca. Needless to say that many generations of Atliacans have studied at Ayotzinapa.

of agave plant), Mister F.,[13] had staked a claim to 1,100 hectares of land (of the 13,592) within the district of Atliaca, belonging to a community called Xicatepetl. Mister F. had strong political backing from the PRI, which was the governing party in the state of Guerrero at that time; the rancher was related to one of the PRI's members of congress. Given the dire corruption at all levels of government that exists in many parts of Mexico, especially in states like Guerrero, and in light of the political and financial might wielded by the rancher, the prospect that the inhabitants of Atliaca would be able to successfully defend their 1,100 hectares of land looked extremely slim. The lands in question are located in a fertile area, on a hillside that produces abundant wood and palm fronds.

In 1975, and for the next 20 years, F. would send his cows to graze on the Atliaca land, against the will of the local people. He had approximately 200 head of cattle, and they caused serious damage to the peasants' crops. Mr. F. also invited other cattle ranchers whom he was friendly with to send their herds to graze on the villagers' land. This created a situation of grave conflict between the inhabitants of Atliaca and the rancher. His cows would overrun corrals and fields, destroying the maize; "we [the peasants of Atliaca] could no longer plant there because of the cows, and there was a huge argument about it and we decided we would rather not work the land".[14]

Mr. F. gave legal justification for his theft by arguing that the people of Atliaca were smallholders working private land, and that he had bought it from its legitimate owners. The villagers and their leaders argued that this was common land that had been ratified by law, but they lacked the documentation to prove this. Atliaca had in fact been trying to have the common land belonging to the village officially recognized for many years. In 1915, the General Archive of the Nation (AGN) reported on the search for the original property deeds corresponding to the village of Atliaca.[15] In 1935 the Department of Agriculture submitted a new request to the AGN for a search to be carried out for Atliaca's historical documents.[16] And in the year 1940, the agricultural authorities issued a historical-manuscript report concerning the ancestral property deeds of Atliaca.[17] This demonstrated that back in 1915, the village of Atliaca had formally requested official recognition of its common land; all that remained to be done was to find the authorities' resolution issued in response to this request (Ruiz Medrano 2013).

Given the situation, Maestro Modesto Vázquez Salgado decided to support the village authorities in defending their land. Mr. F., in his attempt to consolidate his claim as rightful owner of the land, persuaded the state authorities to issue arrest warrants

13 For the safety of actors involve in this dispute, I only mention the *mestizo* who stole the lands by its initial name.

14 My parentheses. Interview with Modesto Vázquez Salgado, fall 2003.

15 AGN, *Archivo de Buscas y Traslado de Tierras* 45, expediente 10, year 1915.

16 AGN, *Archivo de Buscas y Traslado de Tierras* 65, expediente 101, year 1935.

17 Archivo General Agrario, expediente 9777; year of 1940.

against Modesto and several other villagers from Atliaca. When Modesto found out that there was warrant for his arrest, he decided to study law so that he could defend himself and his village in the state courts. He immediately applied to the Faculty of Law at the Autonomous University of the State of Guerrero, and began studying while also working as a bilingual teacher. Initially, Modesto travelled back and forth constantly between the rural school he had been assigned to, close to the city of Chilapa, and the state capital Chilpancingo, where the university was located. To make his studies more affordable, he eventually decided to rent a small room together with some other students.

> [...] so that's where I would work at night, and I was keen to know how I could defend myself on the day of my court date, so I didn't mind the lack of sleep. I had to find the elements I needed to defend myself and respond [to the accusations], because it's scary having an arrest warrant.[18]

Some of the villagers were PRI supporters, and they tried to convince the people of Atliaca that the rancher was right and that the village had no common land, that it was all private property and the rancher had bought the land legally. However, in 1973 one of the village leaders, a man named Severino Iglesias, had found documents in the home of an elderly man that proved that Atliaca had had common land assigned to it. The documents contained a presidential decree and the definitive map of common lands assigned in 1956. The decree was signed by President Adolfo Ruiz Cortines (1952-1958). The papers were wrapped up in a nylon bag and hung from the ceiling of the old man's house inside a small container. Aided by these documents, the Atliaca authorities and Modesto began to investigate and to communicate their legal findings at the village meetings in Atliaca. They confirmed that since the colonial period, Atliaca had always been a village with common land, rather than smallholdings.

Their arguments convinced the locals, and the village began to organize; they met regularly to decide what steps should be taken. The Atliaca authorities, accompanied by the majority of the villagers, began to protest with placards outside the offices of the Agrarian Tribunal in Chilpancingo. They brought together more than 400 people from Atliaca, including men, women and children, to claim their rights over the land that the rancher wanted to take away from them. The community also hired lawyers to defend their case. The trial, from the moment that the documents were found that proved that the land surrounding Atliaca was commonly owned dragged on for almost thirty years.

Throughout that time, Modesto acted as advisor to the village authorities. From time to time, he had to explain the difference between common land and smallholdings to people at village meetings. On more than one occasion, worried peasants from Atliaca told him that they did not want to be 'communists' and Modesto had to explain to them

18 Interview with Modesto Vázquez Salgado, summer 2004.

that common land was synonymous not with communism but with working together to cultivate and take care of the land, as they had done since ancient times.[19]

It was undoubtedly of fundamental importance for the village to have the documents attesting its grant of common land dating back to 1956. The long years of holding out and waiting finally paid off when, on December 27th, 2004, the courts ruled in favor of Atliaca and the village was able to recover its land. The Mexican judicial authorities ordered the rancher to vacate the land belonging to the village, but despite the damages he caused to the villagers over many years he was not required to pay them any compensation. Locals like Modesto simply say that

> [...] it was enough for him to give back the land. The rest was water under the bridge. They didn't take matters any further, they didn't ask him for any more, because he's a landowner and he has social status, so things just stayed the way they are now.[20]

When the village authorities returned home with the favorable ruling, the whole of Atliaca organized a procession to welcome them and accompany them from the village entrance to their offices at the town hall. At the suggestion of the community leaders, a cow was bought and the victory was celebrated with a great banquet and music. With the festivities over, the boundaries of the land belonging to Atliaca were redrawn with the support of a topographic engineer from the offices of the Institute of Geography and Statistics. Some of the older inhabitants of Atliaca, who were the most familiar with the old marker stones and village limits, acted as guides on field trips to different parts of the 13,592 hectares.

After Atliaca obtained official recognition of its commons and recovered the disputed land, the villagers decided to work together to plant magueys and trees. In Modesto's opinion, since the struggle for their land took place, the people of the village have become more aware of the importance of cooperating with one another to be successful in negotiations with the state.

Modesto, until his dead some years ago, continued working as a bilingual teacher and voluntary 'advisor' to the village authorities. Many evenings he usually kept meeting up with them to discuss matters outside the church, and on Saturdays he always used to visit the office of the *Comisaría de Tierras* (Town house of land commissary), a meeting point for several of the older inhabitants of Atliaca and holdover from the now defunct council of elders, to talk over village issues and reach agreements in the interests of the village inhabitants and future generations.

Without doubt, their knowledge of local history and their unity in the face of adversity allowed the villagers to achieve something of true benefit for the people of Atliaca.

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19 Interview with Modesto Vázquez Salgado, summer 2004.
20 Interview with Modesto Vázquez Salgado, spring 2005.

For years, outsiders had taken advantage of the fact that the local inhabitants had 'forgotten' that they lived in a village with common lands, to the extent that some of these lands had been acquired as private property. The efforts by Maestro Modesto to make the people of Atliaca aware of the importance of knowing their rights, and especially to educate himself so that he would be in a better position to negotiate with the Mexican state, were ultimately successful. Modesto's professional training, first as a teacher and then as a lawyer, was the result of his realization that he would need to find external resources to allow him to create better conditions for himself and the inhabitants of his village. Certainly as part of this process, Modesto learned increasingly sophisticated tools to negotiate with the state, and finally, after many years of negotiations in court, the inhabitants and authorities of Atliaca were able to recover their land and consolidate their historical territory.

Conclusions

I have tried to show how contemporary indigenous people from a small Nahua traditional town attempt to defend their communal land and territory by employing historical documents and their traditions, elements that provide them with a cohesive social tissue and strengths their local network. I believe that this approach demonstrates the *pueblo's* effective capacity for negotiation, since it relies on using material and symbolic elements and resources which have no prima facie relevance for the Mexican state. For Atliaca, on the other hand, local history and tradition is of the highest importance, since it demonstrates – as nothing else can – the *pueblo's* antiquity as a community and its concomitant right to possess its communal lands. The logic behind these sometimes subtle connections is not always apparent to the state, and even less to a state whose leaders are increasingly insensitive to the claims lodged by indigenous communities. All the same, many indigenous authorities and their people are keenly aware of the importance of their own history and attempt to bring the documentary evidence of it to the attention of the government (Ruiz Medrano 2011, 2013; Ruiz Medrano, Barrera Gutiérrez & Barrera Gutiérrez 2012). Moreover, neither the disinterest nor the puzzlement which this type of evidence and argument evokes in state bureaucrats has led the *pueblos* to stop presenting it. The sense of connection to a rich historical past undoubtedly serves to reinforce community identity and to inspire the defense of communally-worked land.

Of course, the indigenous population is not always successful in recovering local community history; there are undoubtedly many *pueblos* that lack a clear awareness of their historical past. Yet there are just as many *pueblos* that have an interest in reconstituting and knowing their history as a way both of strengthening their sense of identity and of meeting the challenge of maintaining themselves as an indigenous community in a rapidly changing world. Finally, this strategy of recovering and deepening historical

consciousness evidences great cultural vitality on the part of many *pueblos*. They realize that to know their past helps equip them to build a better present and future for themselves and their children.

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